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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001925

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ACTING FM MITRI CREDITS SECRETARY RICE  
FOR ANNAPOLIS, DISCUSSES PRESIDENCY

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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SUMMARY

1. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri, who represented Lebanon in Annapolis, expressed satisfaction with the conference and hope for future steps, attributing his hope to the sincere dedication he sees in Secretary Rice. He explained to the Ambassador on December 6 that his own speech at the conference was purposefully strong against Israel to quell further criticism and threats from the Lebanese political opposition regarding his participation in Annapolis.

2. (C) On the presidential elections, Mitri expressed his appreciation that the U.S. is not pushing majority leader Saad Hariri to make concessions demanded by the opposition on posts in the new cabinet, in return for agreement on a president. Mitri recommended the U.S. maintain its low profile regarding the elections while sending strong messages to the Lebanese public and to March 14 that it will not make deals with Syria at the expense of Lebanon. Regarding the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, Mitri agreed that there is a problem and he and the ministers are addressing the issue with a HRW representative. End summary.

SECRETARY RICE CARRIED ANNAPOLIS

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3. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri on December 6 for the first time since Mitri's return from Annapolis. Mitri expressed his satisfaction with the conference and attributed its success to Secretary Rice. He told us that it was the personal involvement of Rice that ultimately produced the Israeli-Palestinian joint statement. He believed her concluding speech was "remarkable" and he particularly appreciated her choice of words when she said the U.S. will be "judges" of the process as opposed to "brokers," the language associated with previous U.S. efforts. (Comment: Mitri's admiration for Rice was reinforced when he read a positive passage about the Secretary's commitment to working

on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from "The Confidante: Condoleeza Rice and the Creation of the Bush Legacy", after the Ambassador noticed the book on his coffee table. End comment.)

¶4. (C) Mitri expressed disappointment in what he describe as Israel's negative reaction to being bound by the December 2008 deadline and Moscow's proposal to host a follow-up conference during the spring 2008. He said that such a reaction tests Lebanon's confidence in the U.S.'s ability to achieve its goal. Mitri said that the Palestinian delegation expressed to him its high hopes and confidence in Rice, and its concern about Israel's ability to deliver.

#### MITRI'S SPEECH AIMED AT CALMING OPPOSITION

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¶5. (C) Mitri acknowledged he used strong language against Israel in his Annapolis speech and said it was in part intended to fend off further criticism from domestic political opposition. He pointed out that, despite the harsh Hizballah criticism, Nabil Nicolas, a MP in Michel Aoun's bloc, called publicly for Mitri's arrest for attending Annapolis on the grounds of consorting with the enemy. Another Aounist, MP Abbas Hashem, threatened Mitri saying he was smuggled out of Lebanon to attend the conference, but would not be smuggled back in. For these reasons, Mitri believed his attendance at the conference was significant, and he did not want his participation to be deemed illegitimate by the opposition, hence the strong language against Israeli actions in Lebanon. He added that he also was sincere in his concern about issues such as presence of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

#### LEBANON PRESIDENCY: APPRECIATES U.S. SUPPORT AGAINST FURTHER CONCESSIONS

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¶6. (C) Lamenting pressure on the democratic majority by the  
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French, Mitri expressed dismay for the abandonment of democratic practices regarding Lebanon's presidential elections. Lebanon, under outside pressure, has offered a poor display of democracy. Mitri said he appreciates that the U.S. is not pushing majority leader Saad Hariri to make concessions on ministerial posts to the opposition prior to electing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. He said, to the extent possible, it is important to respect the due process of democracy and this is not accomplished through such deal-making demanded by Aoun and others in the opposition. He acknowledged that the Lebanese are paranoid about a potential effect of thawing relations between the U.S. and Syria on Lebanon and recommended the U.S. send strong messages to the Lebanese public and to March 14 that it will not make deals with Syria at Lebanon's expense.

#### PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE CABINET

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¶7. (C) Implying that he meant weeks or months, Mitri said that it will take "more than a few days" to form a cabinet after election of a president. He added that March 14 leaders have not yet decided which ministerial posts should be given to the opposition. He admitted that the new government runs the risk of Shia leaders' refusing to participate in the cabinet. Speculating that Hizballah will continue to support Aoun in order to ensure it has a blocking minority in parliament, Mitri commented that it will be a very difficult process to form the new cabinet. Mitri suspects that the deal Aoun is pushing today on getting ministerial posts is really a cover for what Syria and Iran are demanding.

#### SINIORA AND SLEIMAN: NEW FRIENDS

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18. (C) Mitri recounted the improved relations between Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Sleiman, saying that it started when Sleiman sent a message to Siniora conveying his respect and calling him a "man of principles." In response, Siniora sent his own message expressing appreciation for Sleiman's willingness as army commander to participate in the Council of Ministers' meetings. (Note: Mitri said that it is unusual for a commander of the army to attend these meetings because most commanders believe they are not accountable to the Council, despite Taif-era amendments to the constitution. In contrast to the LAF Commander's usual practice, Sleiman attended over 20 meetings of the Siniora cabinet, presented reports, and responded to inquiries, even after the Shia ministers resigned, which would have provided an excuse for him to no longer attend if that was his desire. End note.) Siniora also recently hosted a dinner honoring Sleiman and the LAF officers.

NAME AND SHAME IF NO ELECTIONS  
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19. (C) Mitri said that if there are no elections, it would be beneficial if the French, the U.S., and others publicly named the obstructionists. Mitri claimed that French FM Bernard Kouchner said he had been prepared to do that, but was instructed by Paris to refrain. Regarding possible French deal-making with Syria, Kouchner told Mitri the previous day that "Syria was pushing us and using us. Not all of the French know it but I do. Now we being accused and the Syrians are innocent." Mitri advised against issuing the draft UN Security Council statement expressing concern about the election delay.

GOL ADDRESSING IRAQI REFUGEE ISSUE  
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10. (C) Mitri responded to the Ambassador's inquiry about the Human Rights Watch (HRW) highly critical report on the treatment of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. Mitri said that the report is accurate in that the situation is bad for the refugees. He said he speaks with Nadim Houry, a Lebanon-based researcher from HRW, regularly and is meeting with him in the next few days to hear Houry's assessment of the refugee situation. He added that the subject is being taken seriously by the ministers, referring to cabinet meetings during which the Minister of Interior has raised the issue.

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